



ST ALBANS

Back to Basics

The Rev. Simone Hurkmans

October 31, 2021, 23rd Sunday after Pentecost

Can we talk about the Toronto Maple Leafs for a minute? What is happening there? My news feed is full of articles about how they just cannot get it together this season. Even though they're 3-4-1, fans are so disgruntled! And that's saying a lot when we're talking about the Leafs, isn't it? I'm not a hockey expert, but from what I've read there just seems to be a lack of effort, a lack of team chemistry. There seems to be no shortage of talented players on the roster. They've just signed another, Rielly, right? But they just don't seem to jive.

My friend Jarrett who's the chaplain at Centre 454 is a lifelong Leafs fan. I texted him this week asking about what's going on with his team. He said "you know talking about this is difficult, years of disappointment and trauma". When I asked about whether he ever thought about jumping ship, about cheering for another team, he said: "this thread is over. I get disappointed in you but I'm still your friend." Being a Leafs fan is serious business. Even though the Leafs have been disappointing fans for decades, people still hang on. They have hope that things are going to turn around. This season, there seems to be something major happening. Something needs to shift. The consensus is that they need to go back to basics. Fundamental team dynamics, plays, bonding. They need to go back to basics if they want to finally move forward with better results.

"This is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." As we've worked our way through the Gospel of Mark this fall, we've heard many stories of challenge. Not only do I mean that the readings were challenging to hear and understand. I also mean that there were many stories about religious authorities challenging Jesus. They ask him: why this, why that? How dare you? Who gave you the authority? Mostly, these stories depict a confrontation. Today's story is a little different. The scribe, the religious authority, hears all these previous disputes. It makes sense to him what Jesus is saying. He asks him in good faith the question



ST ALBANS

about which commandment is the greatest.¹ This changes the whole tone of the conversation, right? Last week we talked about constructive and destructive anger. It makes a difference whether a question is asked in good faith, doesn't it?

The scribe that day is ready to hear what Jesus has to say. He is open to receive new information. He is willing to have his mind changed. But instead of Jesus offering brand new information, some innovation or new revelation, he surprisingly goes back to basics. We tend to forget that Jesus wasn't trying to start a new religion. He was a devout and practicing Jew. He was trying to bring about the Kingdom of God here on Earth. Yes, his intention was to go bigger, to include the Gentiles, or non-Jewish people. But he was doing it from the foundation of his Jewish faith and tradition.

It's fitting that our Lutheran and Protestant siblings are celebrating Reformation Sunday today, October 31. Reformation Day celebrates the "anniversary of the day Martin Luther is said to have posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany"² in 1517. Like Jesus, Martin Luther was looking to further the kingdom. And like Jesus, Martin Luther decided that to do this, Christians needed to go back to basics. They needed to dispense with some of the very human additions to our faith that he felt drew us away from the Kingdom.

What's interesting about Jesus' conversation with the scribe that day is that Jesus isn't advocating for something novel. He's going back to basics. He's reminding those around him that the foundation is two-fold: love God, and love your neighbour. He didn't invent these on the spot! He goes back to the ten commandments, the decalogue, and he sums them up in these two statements. Love God, and love your neighbour.

We tend to think, especially those of us who identify as liberal Christians, that newer is better. That progress is always about coming up with something innovative. Returning to basics or core values, that's just for conservatives. But that's not what

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-31-2/commentary-on-mark-1228-34-6>

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Reformation-Day>



ST ALBANS

Jesus' message is here this morning, and yet he is advocating for the kingdom, for loving all, for freedom. In this case, it's going back to basics that's bringing about the newness, the growth, the openness. Love God, and love your neighbour.

We have the beginning of the lovely story about Ruth and Naomi. A story of loyalty, of companionship, of family, of love. It too, is a story about going back to basics, isn't it? It's Ruth saying to Naomi: "I'm with you, no matter what happened in the past, and no matter what happens. No matter that my father-in-law and husband died. No matter what will happen to us. I'm with you. That's the most important thing."

One of the best parts of my job is that I get to talk to a lot of people. And we get to talk about deep and meaningful things. One of the things we talk about is how COVID has affected them. Many have said that although these last 18 months have been difficult, there have been some positives too. Many have said that this season has allowed them time and space to focus on what's really important. Some have said they've rekindled relationships with family and friends via phone and Zoom. Others have spent more time on cooking, reading, getting outside. They've said that doing these activities has brought them closer to God. In other words, there have been spiritual benefits to getting back to basics. The complaint I'm hearing these days from some is that now that we're resuming all of our extra activities at a frightening pace. We've lost some of that getting down to basics quality.

In a way, the church has had to do the same thing. We've had to let go of so much. In the early days of the pandemic we had to strip down to only the online liturgy and to checking in with people via phone and text. We had to go back to loving God and loving our neighbour. Hey, maybe that's what the Leafs need to do too? Amen.

Question for Open Space: As pandemic restrictions are slowly lifted, what are some ways that we as church can stay focussed on the basics: loving God and our neighbour?